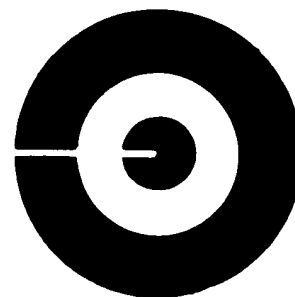


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RATHER ATROCIOUS

If you were a journalist who had spent several days casting doubt on the validity of information coming from your own government concerning a military action by an enemy country, what would you do if the leader of the enemy country suddenly admitted that he had done what your government had accused him of doing?

That was the problem confronting Dan Rather, anchorman and managing editor of the CBS Evening News on March 28. Four days earlier, government officials had disclosed to the media that two battalions of Sandinistas had crossed the southern border of Honduras and were attacking training camps of the Nicaraguan freedom fighters located well inside Honduras.

The day that these disclosures were made, March 24, Peter Collins gave this report on ABC's "World News Tonight:" "These are Contra troops getting ready to go into combat last week. Today they are engaged in the heaviest fighting ever to break out on Honduran territory between the Contras and the Sandinistas. As many as 2,000 Sandinista troops have crossed this river from Nicaragua and penetrated 15 to 20 miles inside Honduras. They have surrounded two Contra base camps out of the half dozen in this pocket of Honduran territory. One of the Sandinista targets is this training area for young recruits. U.S. intelligence sources say that this camp was assaulted four times over the weekend. They say many of these teenage recruits were allowed to slip away because they had no weapons to defend themselves. A Sandinista helicopter overflew Honduran territory much of Sunday, apparently to coordinate the action. The Honduran government, which does not admit the Contra camps are on its territory, denies there is any fighting. American analysts are mystified as to why the Sandinistas would risk damage to their image with a major attack on Honduras when the question of aid to the Contras is still before Congress. The best guess, and it's only a guess, is they want to knock out the Contras before they get that aid."

Peter Collins expressed no doubt about the validity of the reports that a major cross-border attack by the Sandinistas had taken place. Andrea Mitchell on NBC's "Nightly News" was more cautious, saying that

"the administration is saying that they have confirmed the report that 1,000 Nicaraguan army regulars have crossed over into Honduras and have attacked Contra camps." She added that they were expecting a request from Honduras for logistical support to move Honduran troops into the area. She said that the Nicaraguans had denied the report, and anchorman Tom Brokaw turned to correspondent Dennis Murphy in Managua, Nicaragua for his report.

Murphy said: "Tom, they deny it absolutely. Government officials say that it is a Reagan lie, that it's propaganda, that it was put together to gather support for the vote for aid in the Senate this week." Murphy added that the report had been denied by the spokesman for the Honduran president and that military officials on the border had said that there had been no border incursion. He said it was difficult to pin down what was happening in that rugged area, that the details were fuzzy, but that both the Nicaraguan and Honduran governments had denied that there had been a border incident. The area was far from the capitals of both countries, and for the time being there were "just reports."

On the CBS Evening News, Dan Rather demonstrated both by his brevity and his words that he gave very little weight to these reports. He said: "A Nicaraguan fighting force of approximately 1,500 is reported to have crossed the border into Honduras during the past 24 hours. The report of this Sandinista armed foray into Honduras comes from U.S. intelligence sources contacted by CBS News after some of President Reagan's aides began telling journalists and Congressmen that the Sandinistas had made a move. A Sandinista official tonight denied that Nicaraguan troops had crossed into Honduras, and a Honduran spokesman told CBS News tonight he knows of no such incursion."

Note what Rather left out. He didn't report that the Sandinistas had attacked the camps of the freedom fighters and that there was heavy fighting. He didn't say how far inside Honduras they had penetrated. Neither he nor anyone on the ABC program mentioned the expectation that the Hondurans would request assistance from the U.S. Neither he nor any of the NBC reporters explained that the Honduran

reluctance to acknowledge the Sandinista attack was related to the fact that they had not admitted that the freedom fighter camps were on their territory.

It Gets Worse

The next night, the skepticism of Dan Rather and his associates at CBS News about the whole story was thick enough to cut with a knife. Here is the text of the report that angered many viewers, if calls to AIM are any indicator.

Rather: A few moments ago I spoke with CBS News reporter Richard Schlesinger, who is in the Honduran capital tonight. Richard, do the Hondurans believe that there has been a major military thrust into their territory or not?

Schlesinger: Well, Dan, that depends on whom you ask and when you ask it. Publicly the Hondurans say that this incursion is a threat to their sovereignty, but off the record they tend to discount the severity of it. One senior Honduran official told me that he plans to go to the beach today, and his only worry was whether a cold front that's approaching Honduras will ruin his trip.

Rather: If the Honduran government doesn't think this is a big deal, do they go as far as to say that the Reagan administration is exaggerating this whole thing in hopes of getting Contra support?

Schlesinger: They don't use the word "exaggerating," but off the record, they call it a "propaganda ploy." One source in the government said that it was a propaganda ploy. Another source said that this was President Reagan's attempt to sell the \$100 million Contra aid package.

AIM Chairman Reed Irvine promptly fired off a letter to CBS News President Van Gordon Sauter in which he said: "In his interview with Richard Schlesinger in Tegucigalpa, Rather gave us the impression that he and Schlesinger were both doing their best to give us the Nicaraguan line that the stories of the incursion were simply a propaganda ploy designed to garner support for President Reagan's efforts to win Congressional approval of aid for the Nicaraguan anti-communist rebels. . . . Both The New York Times and The Washington Post have pointed out that Honduran officials, and representatives of the rebels as well, were not eager to focus a lot of attention on this Sandinista attack because Honduras officially doesn't admit that the rebel training camps are on its soil.

"There was no recognition of this explanation of the low-key Honduran reaction in the Rather-Schlesinger exchange. . . . I would suggest that if Mr. Schlesinger were an aggressive reporter of the type we sometimes see glorified in the movies, he would have been down on the Nicaraguan border seeking information, not in Tegucigalpa. . . . We can never forget how Dan Rather and others complained about not having been allowed to cover the Grenada landings. I have not heard similar complaints about anyone being barred from covering the Sandinista incursion into Honduras. Has CBS News tried to get a reporter to the area where the fighting is going on, either from the Nicaraguan side or the Honduran side?

"Information that I have received from sources with good connections with the rebel forces indicate that the fighting was indeed very heavy. This seems to be the consensus even among Democrats on the Hill who have opposed aid to the rebels. As of this moment, CBS News seems to be the one major supplier of news that has been openly skeptical of this and has given weight to allegations that the whole thing is merely 'a propaganda ploy' and 'President Reagan's attempt to sell the \$100 million Contra aid package,' to quote sources that Schlesinger and Rather evidently considered authoritative enough to put on the Evening News.

"Van, this is one more performance that explains why so many people in this country feel that CBS often goes out of its way to try to undermine confidence in the United States."

What Rather & Co. Overlooked

Correspondent Richard Schlesinger was not even doing a good job of reporting information available in the Honduran capital. James LeMoyne, correspondent for The New York Times, reported that same day that Honduran officials had stopped denying that there had been an attack and had sent an official protest to Nicaragua. It demanded that Nicaragua "order the immediate withdrawal of its troops to avoid armed clashes that could put peace between the two countries in danger." LeMoyne said that the border area had been extremely tense in recent weeks as both sides had moved large numbers of troops into the area. LeMoyne added: "It appears that the Sandinistas may have decided to attack now, hoping to destroy the rebels in their bases, before they could infiltrate into Nicaragua again."

Washington Times correspondent Glenn Garvin reported that same day that battlefield radio communications monitored in Tegucigalpa described attacks by Nicaraguan helicopter gun ships and cross-border artillery and rocket barrages in support of the attacking Sandinistas. He also reported that prisoners captured by the freedom fighters said that they had been sent to attack the rebel training camp 12 miles inside the Honduran border and that they were not, in fact, in hot pursuit of fleeing guerrillas.

Garvin noted that most Hondurans in the capital appeared to be unaware of the border hostilities. Another report in The Washington Times disclosed that only minutes after a spokesman for the Honduran government had charged President Reagan with sowing "disinformation . . . to obtain approval for his proposals to help the Contras," the same official read a statement confirming that there had been new incursions by the Sandinistas in the province of Olancho.

"Supposedly in Progress"

On Wednesday, March 26, Dan Rather reported that U.S. Army helicopters were carrying Honduran soldiers to "a remote province where a much-talked-about-but-not-at-all-seen major Nicaraguan troop incursion or invasion, as some call it, is supposedly

in progress." He apparently still wasn't convinced that it wasn't all a Reagan hoax. Down in Honduras, correspondent Schlesinger finally got around to reporting that three Sandinista battalions had attacked the main rebel camp 15 miles inside Honduras, much the same story that Peter Collins had reported on ABC two days earlier.

The next day, the CBS Morning News emphasized Nicaraguan denials that any attack had taken place. Anchorwoman Faith Daniels said, "We are getting more reports that the president trumped up what actually happened in Honduras." Maria Shriver interviewed Nicaragua's new ambassador to the United Nations, Nora Astorga, at length. She didn't bring up Astorga's main claim to fame, her participation in the murder and mutilation of Gen. Reynaldo Perez Vega of the Nicaraguan National Guard. Gen. Perez was lured into a fatal trap by Nora Astorga's promise of sexual favors.

Amb. Astorga assured Maria Shriver and the CBS audience that not a single Nicaraguan soldier had crossed the Honduran border at any time. She said it was not the policy of the Sandinistas "to launch aggressions against anybody in Honduras or Costa Rica, even though some countries in the region, especially Honduras, is used by the counter-revolutionaries to attack us. Our policy is not to respond to provocations."

Shriver asked the ambassador why she thought the Reagan administration had made such a claim. Amb. Astorga explained that it was just a way of putting pressure on Congress to vote aid for the Contras, and she suggested that even the \$20 million in emergency aid that President Reagan had given to Nicaragua was really going to go in part to the Contras. She charged the Reagan administration with using "lies" and "fabrications."

Asked about the two Sandinista soldiers that had been captured and shown at a news conference in Honduras, Astorga said: "I'm sure that they are not Sandinista soldiers that have been captured in Honduras, because we have not made any invasion to Honduras."

Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was interviewed briefly after Astorga, and he suggested that she get in touch with her government, because 14 prisoners had been taken, and they and the dead would prove that the Sandinistas had crossed the border.

CBS News didn't buy Nora Astorga's line that no Sandinistas had crossed the Honduran border, but on the night of March 27, its theme was that there had been nothing unusual about this incursion. Unnamed "outside analysts" in Honduras were quoted as saying that the size of this Sandinista raid had been "deliberately exaggerated" by the Contras. The usual "reliable sources" were then called upon to suggest that this was what Washington wanted to hear. But there had been some fighting, and Richard Schlesinger commented: "As if anxious to prove that the Sandinista army was here, the Hondurans laid out a display of captured weapons and five dead Sandinista soldiers."

Ortega Pulls the Rug

On March 28, Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega and its foreign minister, Miguel D'Escoto gave a press conference in Managua that pulled the rug from under those who had been pursuing the line that no Sandinista incursion into Honduras had taken place, or, if it did, it was no different from other border incidents that had taken place in the past few years.

Ortega declared that the Nicaraguan army had "occupied and destroyed" the main training camp of the freedom fighters and other bases as well. Since the bases are located in Honduran territory, Ortega was acknowledging that his forces had invaded Honduras, as the U.S. officials had charged. Amb. Astorga, who had denied that any Sandinistas had crossed the border just the day before, was shown to be lying or misinformed. Army chief of staff Joaquin Cuadra, who had made a similar denial on March 26, was certainly lying, since he was in charge of the operation.

Ortega tried to obscure these lies, arguing that the entire Honduran border area had been converted into a "war zone" and that Honduras had lost control of its borders. That was a different position from the one taken by Amb. Astorga and other Nicaraguan spokesmen. Ortega had reversed the field and was tacitly acknowledging that his government had been lying. Moreover, the casualty figures he cited—350 freedom fighters and 40 Sandinistas killed—confirmed the claim that this was a large operation. The freedom fighters claimed that they killed 200 Sandinistas and lost 40 of their men. Ortega wouldn't say how many troops were used in the attack.

If you were Dan Rather and had been talking about an operation "supposedly in progress" and suggesting that it was perhaps nothing but a propaganda ploy on the part of the Reagan administration, how would you handle Daniel Ortega's "confession?"

Rather had a simple answer: you don't report what Ortega said. On the Evening News, the day Ortega made his admission, here's what Rather had to say about the Nicaraguan incursion into Honduras: "A senior Reagan administration official tonight shrugged off questions about the possibility that President Reagan and his aides may have exaggerated the scope, size and location of the reported Nicaraguan invasion of Honduras this week. The official told CBS News correspondent Bill Plante: 'Why do we have to be sure of the numbers? Maybe we're off on our count,' the official continued, 'but we're right on our facts. An invasion,' the official said, 'did take place.'"

Daniel Ortega's confession, so embarrassing to the network that had done the most to uphold Managua's claim of innocence, simply was not news in the eyes of CBS. The following Sunday Ortega was interviewed on CBS's "Face the Nation," and he again admitted that his troops had attacked the camps of the freedom fighters, which are located on Honduran territory. That night the CBS Evening News carried a report on the interview. Here is all it said on this point: "Ortega argued that his forces did not invade Honduras, although he did concede that there had

been a series of what he called totally defensive operations along the border." CBS didn't mention that Ortega had conceded that those "defensive operations" involved attacking facilities 12 miles inside Honduras. It didn't point out that he had admitted what his government had been denying all week.

NBC News was far more forthright. Reporting on the Ortega-D'Escoto news conference on March 28, Roger Mudd, substituting for anchorman Tom Brokaw, said: "The Government of Nicaragua now admits its troops did cross into Honduras.... After steadfastly denying that its troops had crossed the Honduran border, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua admitted today that it had launched military operations in Honduras. This latest version of events came less than 24 hours after the U.S. Senate had approved more aid for the Nicaraguan rebels, the Contras. Dennis Murphy in Managua."

Murphy: Today the government of Nicaragua admitted in convoluted fashion that its soldiers entered Honduras.

D'Escoto: The greater part of the northern border between Nicaragua and Honduras has become a war zone because of this army that the United States has created and installed in that whole area.

Murphy: The foreign minister and President Daniel Ortega argue that since Honduras has lost control of its southern border to the Contras, that region is no longer part of Honduras. Ortega says that when his soldiers cross the line that the rest of the world recognizes as Honduras, he's chasing an enemy in a war zone. What's more, says Ortega, since he's not showing aggression toward Honduras, he's not in violation of international law. This map details the part of the border in question. The Contra camps are on the Honduran side. The pictures of this Contra camp were taken in November. The Nicaraguans say they have wiped out a major Contra training camp in heavy fighting. They say they killed 350 Contras in the last two weeks and lost 40 of their own soldiers."

Newspapers Coy

If it had been Ronald Reagan, not Daniel Ortega, who had been compelled to admit that what he and his government had been saying was false, that would have been the lead story in all the major media. Here is how some of our leading papers reported the Ortega confession.

New York Times—Headline just above the fold on left-hand side of page one, reading: "Nicaragua Leader Warns of Risks in Use of U.S. Forces in Honduras." Story said that Ortega "refused to say whether Nicaraguan troops had crossed into Honduras in recent days, as had been charged by the Reagan administration and the Honduran government." The story failed to mention that he had acknowledged attacking camps located in Honduras, saying only that he claimed that such attacks are justified. The story is by Stephen Kinzer, who had written earlier of Nicaragua "reportedly conducting raids inside neighboring Honduras" and of the Sandinista's "apparent incursion into Honduras."

Washington Post—Headline below the fold on right-hand side of page one, reading: "Ortega Says Contra

Areas Have Become 'War Zone.'" Story said that Ortega had not admitted directly that his troops had entered Honduras, but in the sixth paragraph, it reports that "Ortega said his troops 'occupied and destroyed' the contra's main training camp and other bases as well as destroying one U.S. made helicopter used by the rebels." Ortega did not dispute that the camps are on Honduran territory, saying only that they are in a "war zone." The story is by Nancy Nusser, who had previously reported that Nicaraguan Army Chief of Staff Joaquin Cuadra had denied that any of his troops had crossed the Honduran border. Her story on Ortega's statement made no reference to that or any other denials of border crossings by Nicaraguan forces.

Baltimore Sun—Headline below the fold, center of page one, reading: "Sandinistas assert 'defensive' right to hit rebels in Honduran 'war zone.'" Story said Ortega claimed the right to hit the "contra" camps inside Honduras, saying the Honduran border had become contra "occupied territory." Mentioned that he acknowledged attacking the main camp and several others only in the next to last paragraph. Based on wire reports.

Philadelphia Inquirer—Headline below fold right-hand side, page one, reading: "Border area a 'war zone' Ortega says." Story reports in second paragraph that Ortega and D'Escoto "said that a recent attack by a large Nicaraguan force on several contra bases inside Honduras was a 'defensive measure' justified by the norms of international law." It said they "managed to avoid openly acknowledging that Sandinista troops had entered Honduras by their redefinition of what they consider to be Honduran territory."

All these weak stories failed to cut through Ortega's smokescreen and straightforwardly report that he had admitted that his troops crossed the border and that therefore he and his officials had been lying when they denied it.

What You Can Do

The worst sinner was obviously CBS, which tried to play down the story, gave excessive credence to the Sandinistas' lies, and then refused to report Ortega's admission. Write to Van Gordon Sauter, President, CBS News, 524 W. 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10019, and to the advertisers listed in the "Notes from the Editor's Cuff."

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